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ABSTRACT

This document reports on a study designed (1) to develop a plan for school improvement using information obtained from an attitude survey, (2) to examine the implementation of the plan, and (3) to evaluate the results to determine if improvements had occurred. Attitude surveys were conducted of students, parents, supporters, and staff in the County of Lacombe (Alberta) in two successive school years. Results of the first survey led to the development and implementation of an action plan to respond to identified school improvement issues of communication, staff appreciation, guidance and counseling, and school-based objectives. The second survey was conducted to determine if the action plan had any impact on attitudes in the county. Results showed that the action plan was only partly successful in changing attitudes on school improvement issues. Attitudes did not improve regarding communication and the guidance and counseling program. Only slight improvement occurred in teachers' attitudes about recognition and appreciation. The most positive attitude changes occurred in regard to school based issues. Recommendations were (1) to continue efforts toward improved communication, staff recognition, and guidance and counseling services and (2) to make provisions for local school systems to conduct their own attitude surveys. (IW)

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AN ACTION PLAN FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

SUMMARY OF ATTITUDE SURVEYS IN THE COUNTY OF LACOMBE

Robert K. David

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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AN ACTION PLAN FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

SUMMARY OF ATTITUDE SURVEYS IN

THE COUNTY OF LACOMBE

Robert K. David

Under Contract To

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Summary of Attitude Survey
Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Change can be brought about in a school system by a strategy of setting objectives, planning to meet those objectives, and evaluating the results in a cyclical process. The strategy should include the provision of feedback to sustain the highest level of motivation to reach the desired objectives. Goal setting and feedback are a means for a Board of Education to initiate change, and sustain that change. A means to gather information to set a direction for change and to get feedback on the success of the change initiatives is the use of attitude surveys.

It was the purpose of this study to develop a plan for school improvement using information obtained from an attitude survey, to study the implementation of the plan, and to evaluate the results to determine if improvements had occured. The project included a case study of how a school system evaluated itself, and made use of the evaluative data to bring about change in the school system.

The questions to be answered in this study were as follows:

1. What are the critical issues for school improvement that can be identified from attitude surveys?

2. Can an appropriate action plan be developed and implemented to address these critical issues?

3. How successful was the action plan in improving attitudes toward the school system?

An attitude survey was conducted in the County of Lacombe in two

successive years, of students, parents, supporters, and staff. The survey instruments were provided by the Edmonton Public School Board. The results from the survey were processed by a research firm, Humanite Services Limited, and displayed in the form of graphs and tables. After the first survey the results were used to formulate plans for improvement in the system based on critical issues identified from the survey results.

The issues identified on a system level were communication, recognition of employees, and improvement in the guidance and counselling programs across the county. Issues were also identified on a school by school basis across the county. Examples of school issues were community attitudes toward the principal at Clive, cleanliness at Lacombe Composite High School, and staff attitudes toward the principal at Eckville elementary. Plans were made to address these problems at a school level and on a county-wide basis. Case study data were gathered to describe how the plans were carried out over the school year. The procedures in carrying out the case study were to record in a journal the activities and events that occured as the results of the first survey were examined. Objectives were set, and activities were carried out to meet these objectives. The case study included observations of county wide events and events which occurred at each school in the system. The second survey was conducted in April of 1986, to determine if attitudes had changed.

Results

A general finding from the survey was that there was a high level of satisfaction with the County of Lacombe on the part of the majority of respondents to the attitude surveys. Respondents appeared to be satisfied with the status quo. It can be concluded from this that not a great deal of change was expected or desired, particularly in the academic programs being offered by the schools. The Board of Education did set objectives for improvement in communication,

recognition and appreciation of employees, and guidance and counselling. Objectives were also set by each school. These issues will be discussed separately under the headings of Communication, Staff Appreciation, Guidance and Counselling, and School Based Objectives.

Communication

The findings of the first survey indicated that communication about the schools, Board of Education goals and objectives, and the school system was inadequate and unsatisfactory. During the 1985, 1986 school year an effort was made to improve communication within the system and with the public in general. Considerably more information was published in the local newspaper, more public meetings were held, superintendent's memos were sent to every member of staff on a monthly basis, and the schools made an effort to improve their communication with parents by sending home more frequent and more informative newsletters. Public meetings were held and trustees visited each school. In spite of the effort made to improve communication, the results of the second survey indicated very little improvement in satisfaction with communication from parents and supporters. The indication of insufficient information to answer questions on the survey remained about the same or actually increased. This was particularly true of supporters, where the very dissatisfied response went from 2 to 9 percent. It can be concluded from this that communication to parents and supporters is still inadequate. It was obvious that more needed to be done to inform the public about school programs and activities.

The Board of Education was still held in low regard by the public and staff. This was in spite of the fact that people thought the programs and staff were excellent. The public seemed to perceive a separation between the Board of Education and the schools. A public relations program is needed to present the Board in a more favorable light so that the Board will get some of the credit for the

excellent programs that were being offered. The Board must be more closely associated with the schools so that the public gets the impression that trustees share responsibility for the excellence that people see in programs that are offered. A proposal was presented to carry out this recommendation, but because of cost it was rejected by the Board. A less elaborate proposal with a minimum of cost and a reallocation of funds should be prepared and presented to the Board again, for inclusion in the 1987 budget.

Teachers indicated that communication with faculty deteriorated during the 1985, 1986 school year. This response may have been biased by difficult salary negotiations which were not resolved for 1986, at the time the second survey was completed; also, the restraint program undertaken by the Board in budget deliberations was a surprise to teachers. Poor communication was blamed in part for the negative reaction of professional staff. Teachers indicated however, that goals, objectives, and philosophy had been communicated more clearly. But when asked if they felt the school system was consistently implementing its goals, policies and philosophy, only 42 percent said "yes" to this question. Teachers still viewed communication as a concern in the school system. It can be concluded that efforts must be continued to improve communication with employees. The most effective activities appeared to be trustee visits to the schools; these visits provided informal opportunities for trustees to meet with teachers, get to know each other and discuss mutual concerns face to face. It is recommended that the program of trustee-school visitation continue. Also, a suggestion from one of the brainstorming sessions might be reconsidered. That is, that one representative from each school should be a part of the liaison committee so that information and issues discussed at committee meetings are taken back to each school by a school representative. It is recommended that the principals and trustees meet together at least twice a year to provide for joint planning and rapport building between these two groups. One of the meetings might be a joint planning retreat early in the school year.

This would give the board the opportunity to communicate goals and objectives to administrators on a first hand basis. Immediate feedback and clarification of ambiguity would assist in providing open and clear communication.

Staff Appreciation

Recognition and appreciation of staff was raised as a concern because only 56 percent of the teachers felt they were getting adequate recognition. A number of principals also saw this as a concern and increased their efforts to recognize excellent performance. In spite of the difficulties experienced in salary negotiations, teachers did realize that an effort was made to indicate that their services were appreciated. The staff appreciation night was particularly successful, with 450 staff and spouses in attendance. The retirement banquet, the Christmas cards to all employees and other gestures on the part of trustees and administrators to show appreciation were well received. The program to increase recognition and appreciation of staff begun in the 1985, 1986 school year was moderately successful and should continue to be developed in subsequent years.

Guidance and Counselling

Guidance and counselling was raised as a critical issue because of responses to the survey that indicated this program was unsatisfactory. The survey a year later still indicated a low level of satisfaction with this program. Part of the response to this concern was to provide more information to students and parents about the services available. Only at Lacombe Composite High School was there any indication that the increased information had any effect on attitudes, and there the effect was limited to greater satisfaction with program and career guidance. The change in opinion of the students at this school may be related to a change in personnel. A new guidance counsellor was appointed to Lacombe Composite in January of 1986.

It has been suggested by counsellors and administrators that one year was inadequate time to evaluate the impact of changes made in the guidance program. Some of the plans were just starting to be implemented when the second survey was held. For example, orientation programs for junior high students to their future high schools were just beginning and did not take place soon enough to influence junior high responses to the question about satisfaction with high school program planning assistance. One response to the concerns in guidance and counselling was to initiate introduction of a new health and guidance program at the junior high school level on a County wide basis. This new program has a high content of career guidance, and career interest testing. However, such an undertaking is costly, and it takes time for funds to be allocated, programs to be planned and materials to be purchased. All of these plans were underway, but had little effect on the 1986 attitude survey results. These plans will be continued and the new program will be introduced over the next few years. This is an example of the survey results having an impact on long range planning, or confirming the merits of long range planning already under way before the survey was held, the influence of which will not be felt on programs or on attitudes immediately.

A study was made of the guidance and counselling program. Recommendations from this study included increases in professional staff. The proposal to increase staffing allocations to provide more guidance and counselling time and expertise in each high school was not accepted by the Board. Each school will have to make an effort to provide more guidance service with existing staff. The level of dissatisfaction with this program has continued. Therefore, it is recommended that guidance continue to be a priority at the school level for reallocation of existing staff where possible. Our guidance and counselling program is the topic for the administrators' retreat, to be held in September of 1986.

County wide inservice programs should be provided to assist teachers to

gain knowledge and expertise in providing guidance service to students. Other recommendations are that library materials on careers be increased in each secondary school; and that the computerized career guidance program be purchased for the County Material Resources Center, and be made available to the schools on a loan basis. Finally, schools should attempt to keep parents informed about the guidance programs being offered to students. Parents should be involved in discussions of high school program planning for their junior high students; they should be invited to the school and programs should be explained so that parents are well informed and can assist their son or daughter to make program choices.

School Based Objectives

The activities carried out by each school to support the objectives of the Board of Education and to reach objectives for that specific school appeared to have little effect on the survey results for 1986. Three notable exceptions to this generalization occurred at Clive School, at Lacombe Composite High School, and at Eckville Elementary. An examination of the survey results from students and parents in Clive was a contributing factor, leading to the resignation of his designation by the principal, and the appointment of a new principal to that school in September of 1985. This change in administration had an impact on attitudes toward the principal and a number of programs in Clive. The change in attitude was particularly pronounced in junior high students and their parents. Numerous written comments submitted on the surveys confirmed the confidence people had in their new principal.

At Lacombe Composite High School a major effort was expended in improving the school's appearance and cleanliness. The activities of the "school appearance and comfort" committee were successful in changing the attitudes of parents, students, and staff on this question from a very negative to a positive attitude. This was accomplished by hard work; but the effort was motivated in

part by the survey results which led the school to set cleanliness as a priority. For these reasons the survey had a positive impact on these two schools. Also the results of the second survey confirmed that the changes that had been made were well accepted, and were successful.

At Eckville Elementary School, the efforts of the principal were rewarded by an increase in staff regard. Teachers' response on the question "Do you respect and have confidence in your principal?" went from 56 percent to 88 percent "yes."

The results of the second survey can be summarized as follows:

1. Attitudes remained much the same from one year to the next toward the County of Lacombe school system.

2. Attitudes toward the academic program were positive.

3. On some of the critical issues identified by the Board, and for some sub-groups, attitudes deteriorated slightly.

4. Many respondents to the second survey indicated they had insufficient information to answer questions or that communication in the school system was still unsatisfactory.

5. Principals and teachers felt that communication of goals and objectives had improved.

6. Some improvements were noted in teacher attitudes about recognition and appreciation.

7. Attitudes on the part of senior high students and parents in Lacombe improved toward assistance in school program planning and career planning.

8. Attitudes toward the guidance and counselling program did not improve elsewhere in the County.

9. Positive changes in attitudes were noted toward Clive School, particularly in relationship to the principal.

10. Parents, students and teachers responded more positively toward

the cleanliness of Lacombe Composite High School.

11. The attitudes of the teachers at Eckville Elementary School improved toward their principal.

Conclusions

Conclusions drawn from the results are as follows:

1. The respondents to the survey were generally positive about the school system, and did not expect radical change.

2. Communication to parents, supporters, and staff is inadequate.

3. Efforts made at appreciation and recognition of teachers were moderately successful in improving attitudes. Teachers perceived such things as the staff barbecue, the retirement banquet, trustee visits to schools, letters of commendation and thanks, and the Christmas card, as sincere attempts to show appreciation for their efforts.

4. Attitudes toward the guidance and counselling program did not improve.

5. The greatest increase in positive attitude was related to school based issues.

6. The use of attitude surveys was helpful in focusing attention on concerns in the school system. The survey results were also helpful in highlighting some of the strengths of the school system, and confirming that the various steakholders in the County of Lacombe are happy with their school system, and see little need for radical change.

Recommendations

Based on the results and conclusions of this study it is recommended that:

1. A low cost public relations program should be developed to assist in communicating better with the community. Public relations of the Board itself should be a priority for this communication program.

2. Further inservice programs should be held in the County to assist the principals with ideas and strategies to communicate with their parents and communities more effectively.

3. Efforts should continue to improve Board communication with employees. This should include distribution of a summary of Board actions immediately after Board meetings. Copies of Board meeting minutes should be distributed to every staff room as soon as possible after meetings.

4. Efforts to improve staff recognition should continue.

5. The guidance and counselling program should continue as a priority program for attention and upgrading over the next few years. As far as possible, staff should be provided for this purpose.

6. The new program in junior high health and guidance should be introduced as soon as possible.

7. Teacher inservice programs should be planned in conjunction with the introduction of the health/guidance program, and adequate supplies should be provided to assure its success.

8. Keeping parents informed about the guidance program and counselling services available should also be a priority for communication.

9. Another attitude survey, with a smaller population sample, should be conducted in two or three years to compare with the 1986 survey to see if improvements in attitude have occurred or if there is a direction indicated in attitudes in this school system.

10. Alberta Education should supply local jurisdictions with the following support services:

a) provision of sample surveys,

b) advice on their administration,

c) assistance in compiling and analyzing data, similar to the services provided by HSP for this study. (This would mean the use of an Alberta Education computer program which would take the survey results and present them in the form of bar graphs.)

Summary

Attitude surveys were conducted in the County of Lacombe in two successive school years. After the first survey the results were studied and a plan was developed and implemented to respond to concerns identified by the survey. The second survey was conducted to determine if the action plan had any impact on attitudes in the County.

The results of the study were discussed, and conclusions and recommendations were considered. A general conclusion was that the study was successful in answering the questions posed. Critical issues were identified, action plans were developed to deal with the issues, and attitudes toward the system were measured to determine if the activities were successful in improving attitudes toward the school system. The issues identified were unsatisfactory communication and recognition and appreciation of staff, and an unsatisactory guidance and counselling program. Issues were also identified on a school by school basis. Attitudes did not improve with regard to communication and the guidance and counselling program. There was only a slight improvement in attitude of the teaching staff regarding recognition and appreciation. The most notable positive change in attitudes occurred in relationship to school based

issues. This was illustrated by the change in attitudes in Clive, at Eckville Elementary, and regarding school cleanliness at Lacombe Composite High School.

Recommendations were proposed to continue efforts for improvement in communication, particularly first hand or two way communication. It was recommended that efforts to provide recognition to staff should continue. Recommendations were proposed for improvement in the guidance and counselling services. Recommendations were also proposed to Alberta Education, to provide services to local jurisdictions which would allow school systems, at minimal cost, to conduct attitude surveys as part of their school system evaluation program.